

**Sunday, October 29, 2023**  
**Matthew 22:34-40; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15**  
**Having an Attitude of Gratitude**  
**The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching**

The story goes that two men were stranded on a deserted island. While the one man searched and searched for firewood, shelter, food, any way possible to make a signal so that they may be rescued; the other calmly sat on a rock looking out on the ocean. The one man said, "I don't see how we will ever get off this island!! We are stuck here!" The other man said, "Don't worry we will be rescued." The other man shook his head and began his search again for food, shelter and firewood. Finally, after a long time the one man turned to the other and said, "Why are you just sitting there, so confident and calm? Help me!" And the other said, "you don't understand, I am a very wealthy man." The first man said, "What good are your millions so far from any civilization?!" And the other said, "you don't understand, at my church, I tithe, that's right, I give 10% of those millions each year to my church. My pastor will find me. No problem."

Here we go, welcome to Stewardship Dedication Sunday and yes, I'm going to talk about money, our gifts, our blessings, this church, throw in some Reformation, the whole thing. Did you know it is a well-known fact that most preachers don't like to preach about money? Gee, I wonder why?! The Apostle Paul tells us in the book of Acts, "For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the **whole** will of God." And so will I, because pledging, making a commitment to give to the church is as much a part of being a Christian as baptism or communion. And preaching about money was just as sensitive an issue in Jesus' time. But that didn't stop Jesus from talking about it. I read that there are 2,350 passages in the Bible dealing with money and material possessions – more than on any other subject. One out of every six verses in Matthew, Mark, and Luke deals with money. I get the impression God wants us to deal with this issue, at least once a year!

In our Epistle lesson for today, the Apostle Paul is writing to the church in Corinth. Corinth was a wealthy trading center. Paul is writing them to raise money, for the Christian church in Jerusalem, which was in trouble. Tensions were rising as Christians were being persecuted and the church needed help. Since Corinth was surrounded by a rich agricultural area, he makes his appeal to the Corinthians with an agricultural metaphor. Just as corn seeds have to be planted in the Spring for corn to be harvested in the Fall so too must the seeds of thankfulness be planted for thanksgiving to be harvested. And what are the seeds of thankfulness that must be planted? According to Jesus, they are the seeds of love, according to Paul, they are the seeds of generosity.

Paul's message to the church in Corinth has a few important truths that we too can learn as givers to our church. **First**, Paul speaks about their **attitude toward giving**. You know, having an attitude of gratitude. To Paul, grudging generosity is a contradiction. When Paul says, God loves a cheerful giver he isn't saying God loves those who give, give and give and give until it hurts. When we give, we should not be giving out of obligation, or to get something in return, we should be giving because we are grateful. Maybe I should have said, welcome to Gratitude Sunday.

We joyfully give, cheerfully give, because we love this church. We give because we want to be able to worship here as we choose. We give because we feel embraced by a community who embraces all people, no matter where we are on our faith journey, no matter our background, no matter who we are or want to become. We give because we love what's going on here and want it to continue and grow. We want those who are sick or recovering or homebound to be visited. We want weddings, baptisms and memorial services to happen here. We want a place where we can give our time and our talents to better our community and our world. We give because we like our lights on, our heat on, our coffee hot, a bulletin to follow along, Grace at the piano, Andy directing the choir, Kathy singing along side, Amanda teaching our children, Michael nurturing our youth, Nancy holding all things in the office together, this preacher in the pulpit, and a new pastor soon to arrive! We give, we should give, Paul tells us, out of joy, for all of the blessings in our life, this church being one of them.

Today is Reformation Sunday. We are a church reformed and always reforming, and we owe a lot to our history and its meaning. We owe a lot of debt. You know, someone asked me recently why we use the word debts in the Lord's Prayer while our Catholic friends and others use trespasses. Believe it or not, this has to do with the Reformation. As most of you know, on October 31, 1517 a 16<sup>th</sup> century teacher and monk named Martin Luther posted 95 Theses on the door of the Roman Catholic Church in Wittenberg, Germany. These writings were mainly in opposition to the church's selling of indulgences. What does that mean? People could actually pay for forgiveness, what?! Yes, people could pay the priest and he would absolve them of their sins. Done. And from this practice, the church gained a lot of money. This was just one of the things Martin listed in his paper. But this started a movement that began the Protestant Churches, and this changed the way we worship, like changing trespasses – meaning sins, violations, to debts – what we owe God and others.

We need daily bread, we need daily forgiveness, but we also owe to God what we cannot pay and that makes us debtors. Our debts are the things we have left undone. It takes us beyond thinking of God as only a judge who can take away our violations, or a church which we can pay for our infractions to go away. It teaches us, as Jesus teaches in the great commandment, to love God with all we have, love God like a parent. To be the loving child who acknowledges where we love with all our heart and need daily forgiveness when we fall short of that.

**Second**, Paul wants the church to understand the *effect their giving creates*. The Greek expression for "generous gift" (*eulogia*) commonly refers to an act of blessing. Paul picks up this theme at the end of the chapter. Not only does giving have practical effects; it also results in praise and thanksgiving to God and builds up the unity of the church. Corinthian giving, says Paul, will demonstrate the unity in diversity that marks the church of God and how it relates to the world.

Ordinarily, in our culture we do things expecting to get something in return. We work all week and expect a paycheck on Friday. We put money in the bank and expect to get it back with interest. We give to the church and expect a quality worship service and visits from the pastor. But the Greek term for generosity is the opposite of this. The seed of thankfulness consists of giving without the expectation of receiving something in return.

“Giving isn’t about the receiver or the gift but the giver. It’s for the giver.” Who do you think said this, “giving isn’t about the receiver or the gift but the giver. It’s for the giver.”? Some great preacher? Some great theologian? Someone you know? Ready? It was Stephen King. I know, hard to believe, but it’s true. It is a little one-page piece from the author of spine-tinglers and movies that give you the creeps, that he wrote for a magazine. A piece called, “What We Pass on.”

He writes this, “A couple of years ago, I found out what ‘you can’t take it with you’ means. I found out while I was lying in a ditch at the side of a country road, covered with mud and blood and with the tibia of my right leg poking out the side of my jeans like the branch of a tree taken down during a thunderstorm. I had a MasterCard in my wallet, but when you’re lying in a ditch with broken glass in your hair, no one accepts MasterCard. We all know life is ephemeral, but on that particular day and in the months that followed, I got a painful but extremely valuable look at life’s simple backstage truths. We come in naked and broke. We may be dressed when we go out, but we’re just as broke. Warren Buffet? Going to go out broke. Bill Gates? Going out broke. Tom Hanks? Going out broke. Steven King? Broke. Not a crying dime.”

“All the money you earn, all the stocks you buy, all the mutual funds you trade – all of that is mostly smoke and mirrors. It’s still going to be a quarter past late whether you tell the time on a Timex or a Rolex. No matter how large your bank account, no matter how many credit cards you have, sooner or later things will begin to go wrong with the only three things you have that you can really call your own: your body, your spirit and your mind. So I want you to consider making your life one long gift to others. And why not? All you have is on loan anyway. All that lasts, is what you pass on. Giving isn’t about the receiver or the gift but the giver. It’s for the giver. One doesn’t open one’s wallet to improve the world, although it’s nice when that happens; one does it to improve one’s self...A life of giving – not just money, but time and spirit – repays.” Thanks Stephen King.

**Third**, Paul wants the church to understand the **divine action that works through their giving**. God is present. The sowing/reaping metaphor is used extensively in Scripture. Paul is saying our greatest reward is a relationship with Jesus, right here, right now. Not when we get to heaven, now. The kingdom is now. Relationships are now. So then how does God reward a faithful giver? Actually, it is by rewarding us with more service. In other words, the more you give of yourself, the more you will see the reward and want to give more.

Author Max Lucado, put it this way, “You don’t give for God’s sake. You give for your sake. The purpose of giving or even tithing, he writes, is to teach you to always put God first in your lives. How does this kind of giving teach? Consider the simple act of writing a check for the offering. First you enter the date. Already you are reminded that you are a time bound creature and every possession you have will rust or burn. Best to give it while you can. Then you enter the name of the one to whom you are giving the money. If the bank would cash it, you’d write God. But they won’t so you write the name of the church or group that has earned your trust. Next comes the amount. Ahh, the moment of truth. You’re more than a person with a checkbook. You’re David, placing a stone in the sling. You’re Peter, one foot on the boat, one foot on the lake. You’re a little boy in a big crowd. A picnic lunch is all the Teacher needs, but it’s all you have. What will you do? Sling the stone, Take the step, Give the meal?

Careful now, don’t move too quickly. You aren’t just entering an amount...you are making a confession. A confession that God owns it all anyway. And then the line in the lower left-hand

corner on which you write what the check is for. Hard to know what to put. It's for the light bills and literature. A little bit of outreach. A little bit of salary. Better yet, its partial payment for what the church has done to help you raise your family...keep your own priorities sorted out...tune you in to his ever-nearness. Or, perhaps, best yet, it's for you. It's a moment for you to clip yet another strand from the rope of earth so that when he returns you won't be tied up."

(1)

I close with this story. A woman was traveling home from a business trip. She describes how when she reached her final destination two flights later, she was going right to a restaurant to meet her friends, so she wore her -- not so comfortable but oh so pretty -- shoes to meet her plane. So she gets off the first flight and starts to walk to her connecting gate and is walking a bit slow to keep her feet from hurting and realizes about 20 gates later that she left her book on the plane. And it was a library book. So she rushes back to the plane and the plane is still at the gate, the attendant goes in and brings her the book. Great!

So, she walks a bit faster and gets about 20 gates away and realizes she left her purse on the counter. Now her feet hurt and she's running out of time. She rushes back and retrieves her purse which thankfully is still sitting there on the counter. She turns around too fast and the heel of her shoe breaks. Really frustrated now, she takes off her shoes and swearing quietly under her breath, rushes back to her gate one more time. Breathless and limping, she gets to her gate and everyone, everyone at the gate is standing looking out the window onto the tarmac. She is thinking, a bit irritated - what the heck is happening, we should be boarding this plane. So she limps over to the window and looks out. There she sees a plane unloading something large, something covered with an American Flag, a coffin, and she realizes it is a soldier returning home. And she looks to see about 20 ground crew standing there saluting as the coffin is escorted off. Suddenly, her foot no longer hurts, time is standing still and all of that stuff she was so concerned about, so angry, so frustrated, so irritated about, is simply gone. And she is filled with gratitude for those ground crew members who were showing such respect and care for someone they didn't even know, but who had served our country. (2)

She states, and I love this line, "I hate when people say, I'm having a really bad day. She tells them, no you are not having a really bad day. You had one bad moment in your day and decided to nurse it all day." When you are in a place of gratitude you cannot be in a place of self-pity at the same time. You ask yourself, how can I show gratitude to the one who created the day, who sustains my day?

In our lives as stewards, the gifts we offer -- our time, our talents, and our financial resources -- are holy gifts. They are symbols of love and signs of grace that are offered out of joy, gratitude and devotion. These gifts are not dues to be paid or entrance fees to be offered. They are gifts of love. What Paul is trying to say in the passage is the way you show gratitude is through relationships, with God, with others. It is living the greatest commandment, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and your neighbor, your neighbors here, your neighbors out there, as yourself.

And so, if you haven't already, think about how much you can and want to give here next year and figure out how you want to pay for that. One lump sum, one check per week, quarterly, online? Whatever. Figure it out, write it down and let it go. I don't want to talk about that investment again and neither should you. I don't want to talk about money again and you should be relieved. Then, every Sunday, the offering plate becomes about what extra

you might have that week to give and let the offering you share when you come to church not be about your pledge but about your generous heart.

And let us be awed by the signs of God around us each morning and shout for joy each evening. Because true gratitude towards God, having a grateful heart, being a cheerful giver, is not for what God has done for us, but who God is for us, how this church has embraced each of us, the relationships we have here, and the belief that our meager gifts have the power, this church, here and now, has the power to change the world. May it be so. Amen.

(1) Zukas, The Rev. Tim. 2 Corinthians 9:6-15. 4/25/06.

(2) [Storiesofgratitude.com](http://Storiesofgratitude.com)